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High Mass

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I WAS RAISED in a community where present and past were dominated by religious affairs. By the time I was born, more than fifty years had gone by since most of the Irish Catholics—who had named their county O'Brien and their church Saint Patrick's—were moved off their land by the stern and sober Dutch. There were still Devines and MacDonalds and MacNeiths, but our nearest neighbors were

Hoekstra, Boersma, Douma
Andringa, Vander Ploeg, Van Fleet.

These and thousands more had long ago brought new resonances to northwest Iowa, struck new tones of piety and hypocrisy, industriousness and greed. After the state legislature voted liquor-by-the-drink and neighboring Sioux County voted to remain dry, the Hollanders living there began wearing out the tile at the back entrance to my father's bar. Almost daily at least one would enter, always alone, as cautious as a cat sneaking into an open garage at night. He would buy a drink and take it to one of the booths at the window facing the highway. There he would sit, stiff, erect, back turned toward the other customers, peering through the half-opened slats of the venetian blinds. And if a car he recognized turned into the lot he would leave his drink standing and bolt into the connecting restaurant to order a quick cup of coffee.

If it was hard at times not to wonder about those Dutch, it wasn't hard to respect them. They had come to work the land, not idle it away. They were ambitious and contentious, strong of arm and strong of will. Since the community's founding they had expanded their operation from one white frame country church to three impressive buff brick buildings: Christian Reformed, Bethel Reformed, and First Reformed. There was bad blood among them, but they all agreed on sin, and they took turns posting various degrees of guard outside the movie theater to detect the slackers and deserters among them, and to verify the evil tendencies in the rest of us. Over the same time Saint Patrick's had burned down and was rebuilt and renamed Saint Patrick's. What other Saint could stand with authority before the Dutch? Accordingly, a statue of Patrick, a copy of the one on the hill of Tara, the site of Cormac's great hall, stood between the twin bell towers, right arm raised, features grim, a warning, I would say now, yet an invitation. Thus, the town was divided, and the Hollanders divided among themselves.

We lived next door to the First Reformers and were divided too. The issue for a long time was my mother's objection to sending my sister and me to the Catholic School. My father, a graduate of Saint Joseph's in Ashton, was certain that damnation was near. My mother, who had been to

Ashton and had taught in the school there, was even more certain that a parochial education was a form of damnation itself. Father Hyland, a native of Cork City, was asked to resolve the dispute, either by convincing my mother on pedagogical grounds, or by invoking Higher educational theory. But since my mother assumed, *ipso facto,* that any opposition to her could be no more than just another pitiable sign of parochialism, she was not moved. In the end my father conceded. And because he was one of the contributors to the rectory's stock of Irish whiskey and beer, the priest conceded that my mother was, after all, a good woman—if stubborn—and let the matter drop.

This was the community, then, and these were the circumstances of my religious life. Exactly how they appeared to me at the time, I don't know. But I do know it was for salvation that I learned the Latin of the mass in private lessons with my cousin Tom, and that he and I got up on winter weekday mornings, long before dawn, and walked the mile-and-a-half to church, without breaking fast, to serve as altar boys. It was no easy matter. The wind, having sped thousands of miles across the Canadian shield and the Dakotas with little more than a few grain elevators to slow it down, shouldered its way through the streets, numbing the good and sinful alike. Those days we travelled fast, figuring indulgences earned in wind speed and degrees below zero and supposing sanctifying grace to reside in an empty stomach. So by the time we were running up the steep stairs to the back door of the church we were cold, a little weak, and, by our standards, blessed indeed. Stepping through that door and standing in the high narrow vault behind the altar, gulping in draughts of warm air, was as great a religious reward as I have ever received. I could feel, it seemed, the nearness of good will and approval pressing through the tons of marble. Both of us would remain still for a while just inside the door, and though neither of us ever discussed it, we always savored that quiet moment before one of us reached out a gloved hand to light the light in the sacristy.

Saint Patrick's was a world of permanence, of comfortable and stable routine centuries old. Even at such an early hour the first worshippers, old women with long coats and heavy scarves, were kneeling at the back of the church, turning their beads or reading in the gray light coming through the door from the vestibule. We announced our arrival by lighting the two rows of chandeliers on either side of the nave. Next to the main switch box was a deep wooden closet hung with server's vestments: floor-length black cassocks, soft and worn, and stiff over-starched white surplices, short sleeved, spreading out at the waist with a row of red crosses on the hem. Such foreign yet familiar clothing brought from where? Putting it on meant a great deal more than just dressing. I would look at Tom and wonder at the subtle change in his features, in the movements of his body and voice, and hope that the same change had been expressed in me. Once we had prepared

ourselves, we took down the long handled tapers from the rack on the wall. Lighting them, adjusting the wicks and cupping our palms around the tiny flames, we set out toward the foot of the stairs beneath the altar. We climbed in unison before the intricately carved arches and columns, our flames touching the withered tips of the candles, three on a side, our backward steps taking us out from the center, reflecting each other, bowing, genuflecting, turning, withdrawing. We propped the heavy red missal on its stand at the far right side, placed the bells on the bottom step, slipped the paten out of its felt case, positioned the bowl and the towel on the table to the left. A nun appeared with cruets of wine and water and set them on the altar rail for us to take up. Just before seven o'clock the door of the sacristy opened and Father Hyland entered, dressed in black, his face raw from the cold. Without a word he nodded to us and went straight to the bureau where his vestments had been laid out the night before. We watched in silence as he began, one piece at a time, handling each according to custom, uttering for each its own prayer in a voice still ragged with sleep. First he wrapped the shawl-like amice over his shoulders, and, running his hands down under his armpits and crossing the cords behind his back, tied it fast in front. He took the alb, a white linen gown, and, inserting his hands through the sleeves, placed it over his head raising both arms, and let it fall in diminishing rolls to his feet. The alb he made fast at his waist with the cincture. Next he slipped the gaudy silk maniple over his left hand and wrist to where it drew tight on his forearm, glancing at the same time at his watch and back to where we were standing to make certain we remained properly devout and in line. Then quickly, his voice beginning to smooth out, he turned and picked up the stole with both hands, brushed it with his lips, and laid it over his neck like a yoke, the fringed ends settling in front at the tops of his thighs. Last of all came the elaborate outer garment, the chasuble, adorned with crosses front and back, ample and fresh and bright. And many times brighter out in the gleam of the candles, ascending cold and stiff from their heavy bases to where the six gold collars tightened to sharp tongues of flame. Rising higher, wavering in the lightly disturbed air, clearly received.

. . .Panem nostrum quotidiánum da nobis hódie,
et dimíttee nobis, débita nostra,
sicut et nos dimíttimus debitóribus nostris.
Et ne nos indúcas in tentatiónem:

But deliver us from evil.

Amen.

So I heard it sung winter mornings, the sun just beginning to color the stained glass on the east wall, a deep voice awakening, echoing in the all but

empty church, the smell of sherry and smoke piercing the air. To me, then, such celebration revealed an untold range of being; it conferred a sense of peace and unity within me, and with an harmonious world beyond to which I was somehow joined. Within this whole I was for a moment selfless, yet all of creation, as I felt it, was but a series of expansions of me. In those moments of the High Mass I always remembered the inscription on the stone lintel over the door of the First Reformed Church. "Come Unto Me," it read. I remembered it and heard it distinctly as I heard the sound of the congregation behind me kneeling and lowering their heads. And I could see them coming, in cars driven in from the country, dust covered, the children getting out and standing and waiting; the lanky, light haired women and sunburnt men climbing up from the curb; the old ones, stooped, supporting each other, holding each other, shuffling on the sidewalk past our house Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings. "Come" the inscription read. In those moments we did come, together, though from many parts and through many ways, though we had built up walls between us, given them names, and then confused those names with our own.

Come together
All you that labour
And are heavy laden,
And you shall have rest.

Today I see there is real mystery in all this that reaches past what any church recognizes openly or teaches. Not a mystery of faith, but the higher mystery of emotion, the secret of human need and desire visible in every face we meet, woven into the folds of vestiture, given form in the notes of language. A wholly human sanctity discovered in the acts of assemblage, in the shapes crafted between the stone and the narrow rim of the chalice, the pale images reflected in the raised globe of the ciborium, the sudden flash of bells in a high domed chamber. The outward signs of something just beyond our reach, something lost and brought countless times to mind though not recalled. Links with distant times, distant minds, points of passage to some sanctuary, center of calm, calm breathless center within.